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## Review of *How to understand language*

posted March 31st, 2012

**How to understand language:** A philosophical inquiry. By **Bernhard Weiss**. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2010. Pp. 271. ISBN [9780773537354](#). \$27.95.

Reviewed by [Muhammad Aurang Zeb Mughal](#), *University of Durham*

*How to Understand Language* by Bernard Weiss, professor at the University of Cape Town, is a study of language and its complications, using analytic philosophy to take a broad approach to language. Reviewing theories of meaning, translation, and interpretation, the book mainly presents a dialogue on the views of radical translation and interpretation, introduced by Donald Davidson.

The book is divided into fourteen chapters. The first chapter highlights the relationships between language, thoughts, and social life, while explaining why language has been a difficult object of study in analytic philosophy. Topics like language acquisition and the role and status of language in human society are also covered. In the next three chapters, a conceptual framework to understand language is given by analyzing different theories and paradigms on language, including the Fregean distinctions, the Russellian descriptivism along with the Kripkean scruples, and the Austinian and Gricean speech acts theory. W starts by asking basic questions toward understanding the meaning of sentences and synonymies, leading the discussion to the Quinean rejection of analytic or synthetic distinction in order to make ground for the radical translation and interpretation in the Davidsonian approach to language in the following chapters.

Chs. 5–10 comprise the core chapters of the book, and provide an overview of Quinean thought experiment with radical translation, use-conditional versus truth-conditional foundations of a theory of meaning, and the construction of the theory of meaning. The radical interpretation is dealt with in greater detail with reference to communication and public expression of language in Chs. 7–10. Although W is also not convinced entirely by a philosophical interpretation of language, he appreciates Donald Davidson's approach towards a theory of meaning with reference to normativity as an essential element of language. W also criticizes the truth theory and radical interpretations, including Donald Davidson's theory of interpretation, to some extent supporting Michael Dummett's critique

of Davidsonian radical interpretation while discussing a 'robust', as W describes it, theory of meaning.

In the final two chapters, W explains how the character of language is constructed by community. He discusses issues with rules and privacy with respect to language in the community and the communication of language at the public level.

Although at various points W presents his own ideas, this book reads like a literature review on theory of meaning and radical interpretation posing language as a crucial issue in philosophy. This book will be helpful for philosophers who are interested in understanding language and its basic concepts as well as linguists who wish to analyze language from a philosophical perspective. The book targets scholars and advanced-level students in linguistics and linguistic philosophy, and offers a critique of theories within philosophy of language studies.

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